The Root of Evil

By THOMAS DIXON

CHAPTER XXII.
Through Purple Curtains.

WHEN Nan made up her mind she acted with lightning rapidity. She would force Stuart to an avowal of love that would fix their relation beyond disturbance by the little singer. She had too fine a sense of values to permit herself to become entangled in an intrigue.

She could wait and gain in power for the waiting. Her physician had told her that Bivens' days were numbered.

But on one thing she was determined. She must know that Jim loved her still, loved her passionately, madly as she believed he did. But he must say it. She had no difficulty in persuading Bivens to urge Stuart to visit their country estate in the mountains of North Carolina. The doctor had ordered him there to live in the open air.

The young lawyer refused to go at first, but Bivens urged with such pathetic eagerness he was compelled to accept.

It was a warm, beautiful morning the last week in March when he alighted on the platform of the little railroad station on the estate and took his seat beside Nan in her big touring car. The fruit trees were in full bloom, and their perfume filled the air. The hum of bees and the song of birds he had known in his boyhood thrilled his heart.

"It's glorious, Nan!" he exclaimed.

"Your coming makes it perfect, Jim," she answered tenderly.

As the river made a graceful curve Bivens' house swept into full view—a stunning pile of marble 200 feet long, its tower piercing the turquoise sky in golden grandeur. The stone parapet on which its front wall was built rose in massive strength a hundred feet from the lodge to the granite cliff before touching the first line of the white columns of the house itself.

At the end a formal garden had been built on the foundations of masonry which cost $100,000.

For an hour the car swept like a spirit over the miles of smooth macadam private roads Bivens had built. At each graceful turn his wonder increased at the luxurious outlay of millions.

From each hilltop as the huge glistening castle came into view from a new angle, revealing its marvelous beauty, he thought with a touch of pity of the stumbling figure of the stricken man limping through its halls helpless, lonely, miserable. What strange pranks fate plays with the mighty as well as the lowly! So frail was the broken body now he did not dare risk a cold by taking a ride with his wife.

The machine turned suddenly up a hill and glided through two iron gates opening on the lawn, and the great white chateau loomed before them in a flash of blinding beauty. Stuart caught his breath. He shook hands with Bivens and was shocked to find him so weak.

The little man held his hand with a lingering wistfulness as he looked into his friend's strong face.

"You don't know how rich you are, Jim," he said feebly, "with this hand that grips like iron. I'd give millions to feel my heart beat like yours today."

"You'll get better down here," Stuart answered cheerfully.

"I'm trying it anyhow," he said listlessly. "Make yourself at home, old boy. This house is my pride. I want Nan to show you every nook and corner in it. I wish I could trot around with you, but I can't."

"As soon as you've changed your clothes," Nan said familiarly, "come down to the library and I'll show you around."

Stuart followed the man assigned as his valet to the electric elevator and in a minute stepped out on the fourth floor. He observed with a smile that his room number was 157.

"The idea of living in a huge hotel and calling it a house!" he mused, with grim humor. "Room 157—great Scott!"

His hostess showed him first the library. The magnificent room contained more than 40,000 volumes, bound in hand tooled morocco.

"The funny thing, of course," Nan whispered, "is that Cal has never read one of these exquisitely bound books."

"Why on earth did he make this room the most stately and beautiful one in the house?"

"Maybe he didn't," she laughed. "I'm going to give you a privilege no mere man has ever enjoyed in this house before—I am going to show you my own rooms."

When the tour of inspection had been completed she led him to her own suit, which was located in the southwestern corner, overlooking the magnificent formal gardens with their artificial lake, fountains, statuary and a wilderness of flowers, and farther on over the beautiful valleys of the Swannanoa and the French Broad rivers. Beyond the river valleys rose range after range of mountains.

The magnificence of her bedroom was stunning. Stuart rubbed his eyes in bewilderment. She had taken herself seriously in the creation of this room, and had spent a round million on its ivory bedstead, its purple and gold velvet hangings, its wonderful carvings.

The picture she made standing in this wonderful room was one that never faded from his memory. The poise of her superb form; the fires that smouldered in the depths of her eyes; the tenderness with which her senses seemed to drink in the daring luxury; the smile that played about her lips, joyous, sensuous, cruel!

"It seems all a dream, Nan," he said. "I'll rub my eyes and wake up directly. I thought your New York house a miracle. This is fairyland."

"Perhaps it would be," she said, looking at him a moment through half closed eyes, "if only the prince"—

A look of pain unconsciously clouded his face, and the sentence was not finished.

On the fourth day Nan planned a coaching party to ascend Mount Mitchell, the highest peak in the land of the sky, the highest point of ground that side the Rockies. She had taken this trip with Stuart sixteen years before. She was then but fifteen, and he had just begun to dangle at her heels. She did not tell him their destination.

The party consisted of half a dozen boys and girls whom Nan was chaperoning, Stuart, the footman and coachman. The start was made at sunrise. The morning was glorious, the air rich with the full breath of a southern spring.

At the foot of the first hill the coach suddenly stopped beside the banks of the Swannanoa river.

Nan leaped to the ground, drew Stuart with her to the rear of the coach, and raised her arms.

"Lift me up," she cried, laughing.

He placed his hands under her arms and with a leap and a cry of laughter she was in the empty baggage rack.

"Now up with you!" she cried.

In a moment Stuart was seated snugly by her side and the big red coach was rolling along the old road.

"Now, sir," Nan whispered, "do you know where you are going?"

Stuart nodded.

"To a certain peak among the clouds, where you and I once went a thousand years ago."

Nan nestled a little closer, or perhaps it was the swaying of the coach that made him think she did, and softly said:

"You remember this road?"

"I've seen it a hundred times in my dreams since that wonderful day. It winds along the banks of the Swannanoa for twenty miles, always climbing higher and higher until the river becomes a limpid trout stream. We stop at the old roadhouse, stay all night and next morning take the bridle path with the funny pack horses and climb to the first mountain top, still following the little stream."

"Fine, Jimmy, fine!" she cried, with girlish mockery. "Your geography lesson was perfect! You can walk home with me after school."

Stuart looked at her and broke into a laugh. Again they were boy and girl, and the only change he could see was that she was more splendidly beautiful at thirty-one than she had ever promised to be at fifteen.

"You remember how shocked you were in this same seat, Jim, that day in the sweet long ago when the old coach threw me into your arms?"

"Yes, I felt that I was taking a mean advantage of you."

"I thought you were an awful fool not to accept more gracefully and thankfully the providence which threw a pretty girl your way."

The coach gave a sudden lurch and threw her into Stuart's arms again.

"And now?" he cried laughingly, as he held her firmly for a moment to prevent her falling.

She blushed furiously, threw the ringlets of dark hair from her face and drew back to her position.

"Now, of course, it's unlawful," she answered with sober playfulness.

The man watched her slyly for the next half mile. She was very, very quiet.

They spent the night at the same old roadhouse and slept on feather beds. He hadn't felt the touch of a feather bed in years. He dreamed that he was at school again, a man of thirty-five, playing marbles with a crowd of towheaded boys, and they were beating him at the game while Nan was standing near, her long plait of black hair hanging down her back, laughing at him because he was barefooted!

They started next day at 8 o'clock with the pack horses to make the trip along the dim bridle trail, fourteen miles up the sides of frowning cliffs and over the tops of balsam crowned peaks to the summit of Mount Mitchell.

Nan led the way, mounted on a sure footed young stallion, and Stuart followed her on a little black mule he had selected from the barn for his exact likeness to one he had raised as a pet when a boy. The youngsters came struggling after them, mounted on an assortment of shaggy, scrubby looking animals that knew the mountain path as a rabbit knows his trail in the jungle.

At 1 o'clock they passed through the first series of clouds and out into the sunlight beyond. The next line of clouds was dark and threatening and suddenly poured rain. Slowly but surely the horses picked their way up the mountain side through the storm and suddenly walked out into the sunlight again; they looked down on the smooth flat surface of the clouds through which they had passed.

It was dusk when the party reached the summit. The horses were loosened to graze in the open field and the guides hurried to build a fire in front of the cave made by a projecting ledge of rock beneath which the party was to sleep.

The bed of balsam boughs was too sharp a contrast to Nan's million dollar room to permit Stuart much sleep. Besides, the youngsters were giggling and laughing and joking most of the night. Only a big log marked the partition wall between the men's and women's part of the cave. The space was so limited it was necessary to sleep close together. The girls and boys never grew tired cracking silly jokes about the magnificence of their sleeping quarters. In vain Nan begged for quiet. It was 3 o'clock before they were still at last and she fell into a deep sleep.

Stuart rose, sat before the log fire and watched the regular rise and fall of her bosom as she slept like a child. On a distant mountain side he heard the howl of a lonely wolf. Sixteen years ago the mountains were full of them and they came quite close. He was reminded of the narrowing strip of the savage world, fast disappearing before the march of civilization. Somewhere inside of him he heard the lonely cry of another wolf.

"She's mine—mine! Nature gave her to me in the morning of life—I was a fool. I should have taken her by force, if need be, and she would have thanked me in after years. She has complied with the conventions of society and trampled the highest law of life. Why not smash convention now at the call of that law?"

Again the wolf howled in the distant darkness, and it seemed the echo of his own mad cry. He waked from his reverie with an angry start. He shuddered that he could have harbored the thought for a moment.

The eastern horizon was beginning to glow with the dawn. He rose, walked to the summit and sat down on the pile of stones that marked the grave of Professor Mitchell. He watched in silence until he saw the sun's red rim suddenly leap above the blue-black peaks of the east and drive the last shadow of the night from the valleys below. With their fading mists he felt the darkness lift from his own heart and the sunlight of reason stream in. A new joy welled up from the depths of his spirit. He was alive to his finger tips, and his imagination glowed with the consciousness that life was strong and clean and worth while.

"With the help of God I'll keep it so, too!" he cried. "I'm ready for the fight now. Let it come."

He knew instinctively that it was coming. He felt it in every word that had fallen from Nan's lips since they left on this trip. He felt it most keenly of all when she was silent, read it in the tremor of her mouth, the shadowy tenderness of her eyes, the low, deep tones of her voice.

CHAPTER XXIII.
Decision.

BOTH Nan and the youngsters slept like children until 9 o'clock. Stuart helped the guides prepare breakfast without waking the sleepers and called them at 9.

By 10 o'clock breakfast was over, the guides had formed two exploring parties and set out with the young people chattering and laughing. "We'll keep house, Jim, here in God's palace among the clouds until they return," said Nan.

"Yes," he answered cheerily, "and it will be fun to keep it alone, won't it, with no restraints or studied pretense, no crowd of fools or liveried flunkies near at hand."

They sat down on the ledge of rock which formed their cave house and gazed over the marvelous panorama of a world transformed into blue billowy mountains, flying clouds and turquoise skies. Over it all brooded the deep, solemn silence of eternity. Not a sound reached the ear from earth or air. Nan broke the silence.

"I have houses in town and country, with every whim of body and soul apparently gratified. But suppose that all this madness of luxury, at which you wonder, is but the vain effort of a hungry heart? The time has come in our lives when we should begin to see things as they are."

"I've been trying to do that for a long time," he answered quietly.

"And haven't succeeded," she added promptly. "The trouble is, Jim, that life is a tissue of lies. We are born in lies, grow up in lies, live and move and have our being in lies. I'm growing sick of lies."

Stuart looked at her flushed face with a deepening thrill of the drama of the soul its quick changing expression shadowed.

"Well?"

"I've grown to feel of late," she went on rapidly, "that it's a shame to dodge. The only law my husband has ever known is to take what he wants. I've the right to live my own life. We must each of us choose our world, the one of conventions and shams or the big one that's beyond—the world of reality, where free men and women live and work in freedom while youth and daring lead the way."

She paused and Stuart's lips parted in amazement. Never had he heard such eloquence from the woman before him.

"Jim," she went on falteringly, "I'm lonely and heartsick. I'm trying to tell you that I want your love that I can't live any longer without it."

Her head sank low, and a sob caught her voice.

"There; I've told you. I've no pride left. Tell me that you love me. I want to hear it a thousand times. I want it, right or wrong! Speak! Say something, if only to curse me!"

"You should have thought of this, Nan, before these gray hairs began to creep into my hair."

"I did, Jim!" she cried, eagerly bending near. "God knows I fought! You never knew it, but I did. For whole nights I wrestled with the fiend that tempted me and fought for my love. It took days and weeks to strangle its hold on my heart and force me to betray myself. Oh, Jim, it's not too late to live! Look at me, dearest, and say it's not. For God's sake, tell me that you love me still! Am I old? Am I faded?"

The man had felt sure of himself when she began, but the tenderness, the passion, the yearning appeal of her voice were more than he could resist.

"Look into my eyes, Nan," he cried, "and let me see the bottom of your soul!"

She lifted her dark lustrous eyes, devouring him with love.

"You'll find only your image there, Jim."

He looked at her sternly.

"Before I take you into my arms and smother you with kisses," he whispered fiercely, "there mustn't be any mistake this time. I've got to know that your love for me is the biggest thing in your life—the only thing in your life!"

"I swear it!" she gasped.

"You've got to prove it; I'm going to put you to the test."

"Any test!" she broke in quickly.

"I warn you," he went on, with increasing seriousness, "the test will be a real one. You and I, Nan, could never be happy with the shadow of Bivens' fortune over us."

"But its shadow can't be over us! It's going to be yours. He has given it to me—his death is only a question of a year or two—and I'm going to give it all to you."

"There's not a dollar of his millions that isn't smirched. I'd sooner wear the rags of a leper than soil my hands with it. If you love me you will have to give up these millions."

Nan gazed at him in astonishment and broke into a low laugh.

"Of course, you're teasing me. You can't be in earnest in such an absurd dime novel idea! Give away this enormous fortune!"

The woman placed her hand tenderly in his and nestled close to his side.

"Come, Jim, dear, this is a practical world; you have some common sense even if you are a man of genius; you're not insane!"

"I think not," he answered, soberly.

"You cannot make this absurd demand on me," she repeated slowly, "knowing the awful price I paid for these millions?"

"It's because I know it that I make the demand," he went on, passionately. "We are face to face now, you and I, with all the little subterfuges and lies of life torn from our eyes. The fact that the price at which he bought you was high—say a hundred millions—does not change the fact. I refuse to share with the woman I love the price for which she sold herself, whether the sum be a hundred dollars or a hundred millions! I can forgive and have forgiven the wrong you've done me, but I could never share its conscious degradation."

Nan looked at him in despair, her eyes suddenly clouding with tears.

"What do you mean when you say give up these millions?"

"Just what I say," he answered quickly.

"But I couldn't throw them into the street. What would I do with them?"

"You can give them back to the people, the public, from whom they were taken—the people whose labor created their value. That's what an honest man does when he finds he has wronged his neighbor. There's not a stone in your palaces whose cement was not mixed in human tears. The stain of blood is in every scarlet thread of your carpets, rugs and curtains."

"But you are talking like a mad anarchist. His money was made as all great fortunes are made."

"So much the worse for our financiers. Civilization must rest at least on justice or it can't endure."

"But, Jim, no matter what your theories of life or your ambitions, these millions will make them more powerful."

"It's not true. Not a single great man whose words have molded the world was rich. The glitter of your millions once blinded me and I was on the point of surrender, but I've won out. The people in your little world live for money. They do not possess it, they are possessed by it. They are slaves. You will have to come with me into the great free world—if you love me."

"If I love you?" Nan cried, with trembling lips. "Don't speak that way. If you only knew! My love for you has kept me alive through all that I've endured. It's the only thing that's worth the struggle; but I can't think. Your demand is so sudden, so stunning, so terrifying, I don't know what to say."

"We can never be anything to each other," he answered firmly, "on any other terms than the renunciation of all that Bivens leaves. I don't care what you do with it, just so you wash your hands of it. You and I must begin life just where we left off when the shadow of his money darkened the world for us both. You must give it up."

"It's hard, dearest," she said with a sob, "for your sake it's hard. I've dreamed so many wonderful things that would come to pass when I made you the master of these millions."

"You must choose between his money and my love; you can't have both."

She gazed at him with a desperate yearning.

"I'll do anything you wish, only love me, dearest," she sobbed. "All I ask is to be loved—loved—loved—and that you never leave me!"

But even as she spoke, her mind was made up. She would reserve at least half her fortune secretly. When they were married she could persuade him to be reasonable.

"All right, then, it's settled, but it must be everything with me or nothing. I won't shake hands with my friend and make love to his wife. You must cease to be his wife now."

"But how—what do you mean?" she asked, white with sudden fear.

"Leave your husband, your palaces, your millions and join me tomorrow night on the limited for New York. Bring only a change of clothes in a single trunk and a hand bag. My money must be sufficient. I'll wire for passage on an outgoing steamer. We'll spend two years in Europe and return to America when we please. Are you ready?"

"Oh, Jim, dear," she faltered, "you know that would be madness!"

"Certainly it's madness, the madness of a great love! Come, why do you hesitate?"

The lines of her body relaxed and she began to sob softly. The man waited in silence for her to speak.

"I've done you harm enough, dearest," she said at last. "I can't do this."

"And your thought is only of me, Nan?" he asked with piercing intensity.

"And of myself," she acknowledged brokenly. "I couldn't do such an insane, vulgar thing."

"I didn't think you could," was the bitter response.

"All I ask," she pleaded, "is to hear you say the words that you love me now—just as I am with all my faults."

"Well, I shall not speak them," he answered savagely. "Your husband is the master of millions, but I am the master of something bigger—I am the master of myself. I will not play a second fiddle to your little husband."

The dark head dropped lower. When she lifted it at last two despairing tears were shining in her eyes.

"I understand, Jim," she said simply. "We will go on as we have. I'll wait in silence."

He rose and lifted her to her feet. The voices of the youngsters rang up the mountain's side.

"No, we can't go on like this now, Nan," he said with quiet strength. "The silence has been broken between us. Your husband is my friend and from today our lives must lie apart. It's the only way."

She extended her hand and he pressed it tenderly. Her voice was the merest sobbing whisper when she spoke: "Yes, Jim, I suppose it's the only way."

CHAPTER XXIV.
The White Messenger.

IN spite of Bivens' protest Stuart returned to New York on the first train the morning after the coaching party reached the house.

"Stay a week longer," the little man urged, "and I'll go with you. We'll go together, all of us, in my car. I'm getting worse here every day. I've got to get back to my doctors in New York."

"I'm sorry, Cal," he answered quickly, "but I must leave at once."

Nan allowed him to go without an effort to change his decision. A strange calm had come over her. She drove to the station with him in silence. He began to wonder what it meant.

As he stepped from the machine she extended her hand, with a tender smile, and said in low tones:

"Until we meet again."

He pressed it gently and was gone.

He reached New York thoroughly exhausted and blue, but the sight of Harriet seated on the stoop of the old home by the square watching a crowd of children play brought a smile back to his haggard face.

"They've come to honor me with their good wishes on my voyage," she said.

"What voyage?" he asked in surprise.

"Oh, you didn't know. I've an engagement to sing on the continent this summer. The news came the day you left. Isn't that fine? I sail next week."

A sudden idea struck him.

"Let me go with you, girlie?"

"Oh, Jim, if you only would, I'd be in heaven!"

"I will!" he said with decision. "You've booked your passage?"

"Yes, but I'll change it to suit you."

He found business which required a week and booked his passage with Harriet on a Cunarder which sailed in ten days. A week later Nan and Bivens returned to their New York house. The papers were full of stories of his failing health.

Two days after her arrival Nan telephoned to Stuart.

"You must come up to see Cal tonight," she said earnestly. "He is asking for you."

"Is he really dangerously ill?" Stuart interrupted.

"It's far more serious than the papers suspect. You'll come?"

"Yes, early tomorrow morning. I've an important engagement tonight that will keep me until 12 o'clock. I'm sailing for Europe day after tomorrow."

A sudden click at the other end and he was cut off. His experienced ear told him it was not an accident.

It was just dawn when Stuart's telephone rang and he leaped from bed, startled at the unusual call.

"Well, well," he cried in quick, impatient tones, "who is it? What is the matter?"

"For heaven's sake come at once. Cal was taken dangerously ill at 2 o'clock. The doctors have been with him every moment. He doesn't get any better. He keeps calling for you."

"I'll be there in half an hour—three-quarters at the most."

"Thank you," she gasped, and hung up her receiver.

Stuart's cab whirled uptown through the rivers of humanity pouring down to begin again the round of another day. In all the hurrying thousands not one knew or cared a straw whether the man of millions in his silent palace on the drive lived or died.

The house was evidently in hopeless confusion. Servants wandered in every direction without order. Doctor after doctor passed in and out, and the sickening odor of medicines filled the air. A group of newspaper reporters stood at the foot of the grand stairway.

Nan stood shivering at the head of the stairs, pale, dishevelled, her dark eyes wide and staring with a new expression of terror in their depths.

"How is he, Nan?"

"Worse," she stammered through chattering teeth. "The doctors say he can't possibly live. He has been calling for me for the last hour. I—can't—go!"

"Why?"

"I'm afraid!"

He took her hand. It was cold and he felt a tremor run through her body at his touch.

"Come, come, Nan, you're not a silly child, I'm ashamed of you. If Cal is calling, go to him at once. You must see him."

Shivering in silence she led Stuart to the door of Bivens' room and fled to her own.

On a magnificent bed of gleaming ebony inlaid with rows of opals, thousands of opals, Stuart found the little shrivsled form. The swarthy face was white and drawn, the hard thin lips fallen back from two rows of smooth teeth in pitiful, fevered weakness. The shifting eyes caught sight of Stuart.

"It's awfully good of you to come up here so soon," he began feebly. "I've some plans I want you to carry out for me right away. You see I never thought before of the world as a place where there were so many men and women sick and suffering—thousands and tens and hundreds of thousands. These doctors say that every night in New York alone there are half a million people sick or bending over the beds of loved ones who are suffering, and two hundred die every day."

He paused for breath, and the black eyes stared at his friend.

"Jim, I can't die! I haven't lived! I've got to get up from here and do some things I've meant to do—all those sick people—I've got to do something for them. I'm going to build palaces for the lame, the halt, the sick, the blind. I'm going to gather the great men of science from the ends of the earth and set them to work to lift this shadow from the world."

A sudden pain seized and convulsed his frail body and Stuart called the doctors from the next room.

They stood by in helpless sympathy.

"Can't you stop this pain?" the financier gasped in anger. "What are you here for? Am I not able to buy enough morphine to stop this hellish agony?"

His family doctor bent and said:

"Your heart action is too low just now, Mr. Bivens, you can't stand it."

"Well, I can't stand this! Give it to me, I tell you!"

The doctor took a hypodermic syringe, filled it with water and injected it into his arm.

While Stuart watched the pitiful trick, his eye wandered over the magnificent trappings of the room.

"What irony of fate!" he exclaimed, under his breath.

The sufferer stared and beckoned to Stuart.

Handing him a key which he drew from beneath his pillow he cried:

"Unlock the right hand top drawer of that safe, Jim—the door is open. Hand me those bundles of stocks and bonds and call those doctors."

Stuart complied with his request and Bivens spread the brilliantly colored papers on the white covering of his bed, while the doctors drew near.

"Listen now, gentlemen," he began, still gasping with pain. "You're our greatest living doctors, I'm told. Well, I'm not willing to die, I won't die—do you hear? I'm only forty-nine years old. You see here thirty millions in gilt edged stocks and bonds. Well, there are three of you. I'll give you ten millions each to take this stone off of my breast that's smothering me and give me five years more of life."

The three men of science stood with folded, helpless arms and made no effort to keep back the tears. They had seen many men die. It was nothing new—and yet the pity and pathos of this strange appeal found their way to the soul of each. They never envied a millionaire again.

They retired for another consultation. Stuart replaced the papers and gave the key to Bivens.

"Ask Nan to come here a minute," he said feebly.

Stuart walked to the door and whispered to a servant. When he returned to the bedside the dying man looked up into his face gratefully.

"You don't know how it helps me to have you near, Jim, old boy. I'm lonely. Nan I guess is ill and broken down. I've lavished millions on her. I've given her all I possess in my will, but somehow, we never found happiness. If I could only have been sure of the deep, sweet, unselfish love of one human soul on this earth! If I could only have won a girl's heart when I was poor. But I was rich, and I've always wondered whether she really loved me for my own sake. At least I always thanked God for you. You've been a real friend. Our hearts were young together and you stood by me when—I—was—poor"—

An hour later when the covering was turned back from the dead body Stuart saw that the smooth little cold hand had gripped the key to his treasures in a last instinctive grasp.

He looked again at the lump of cold clay and wondered what was passing in the soul of the woman who was now the heir of all his millions.

Why had she shown such strange and abject terror over his death—an event she had foreseen and desired?

A horrible suspicion suddenly flashed through his mind. He determined to know at once.

As he had feared, Nan refused point blank to enter the death chamber and asked him to come to her boudoir.

He found her standing by a window, apparently calm. Stuart looked at her a moment with a curious detached interest. Suddenly aware of his presence she turned.

"At last, at last!" she cried in low broken accents. "Oh, dear God, how long I've waited and despaired! At last we may belong to each other forever—body and soul! Nothing else matters now, does it? We shall forget all the blank hideous years; you'll forget it, won't you, dearest? You'll forgive me—now—say that you will?"

"I've long ago forgiven, Nan, but tell me about this sudden attack. You were with him when he was stricken?"

"Yes, I took the nurse's place at midnight; I couldn't sleep."

"How long did you stay with him?"

"Until I called you."

"And you gave him the medicine in the absence of the nurse?"

"Only one," she answered, hesitatingly, "a particular kind the doctor had not prescribed, but which he asked for to relieve his pain."

"He asked you for medicine, Nan?" he went on remorselessly. "A poisonous powder—and you gave him one?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure you gave him but one?"

"He was begging for two—I might have given them both—it's possible, of course."

He gazed at her with a look of pity.

"I know that you did, Nan, know it as certainly as if I stood by your side and saw you press it to his lips."

"You know, Jim?" she cried feebly, her head drooping low.

"And you feel no remorse?"

"Why should I? His death seemed only a question of days"—

"From the bottom of my heart I pity you!" Stuart broke in softly. "The state will never reach your act with the law. But the big thing is you have no consciousness of guilt and feel no remorse because you have no soul. You have only desires and impulses. That's why you couldn't wait for me to earn my fortune honestly and so betrayed me for gold. I can see it all now. Your beauty has blinded me."

"For God's sake, Jim," she cried fiercely, "don't—don't talk like that! I can't endure it! You don't mean, you can't mean that you are going to turn from me now, just when I've found your love! I did it for you!"

Stuart looked at her through a mist of tears.

"The spell is broken, Nan, dear; our romance is ended. I don't say it in pride or anger; I say it in sorrow—a great deep, pitying sorrow that cuts and hurts!"

The woman understood. She had at last passed out of his world. Only the memory of a girl he had once loved and idealized remained, and that memory was now unapproachable. The living woman was no longer the figure in the mental picture. The struggle was over.

He extended his hand, clasped hers, bowed and kissed it, turned and walked quickly toward the door. With a half smothered cry she followed.

"Jim!"

He paused and turned again, facing her with a look of infinite sadness.

"Remember," she said brokenly, "I never expect to see you again—we cannot meet after this. I am looking into your dear face now with the anguish of a broken heart strangling me. You cannot leave like this—we have been too much to each other."

He took her in his arms and held her close.

"Forgive me, dear," he whispered, reverently kissing her as he would have pressed the lips of the dead. "I didn't mean to be cruel—goodby."

The door of the great house softly closed and he was gone. A few moments later the servants found her limp form lying in a swoon on the floor.

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Strangers no longer live in the cottage Stuart built on the hills. A jaunty sailboat nods at the buoy near the water's edge. The drone of bees from the fruit trees in full bloom on the terraces praise a luscious harvest in the summer and fall. The lawn is a wilderness of flowers and shimmering green. The climbing roses on the southeastern side of the house have covered it to the very eaves of the roof. Stuart has just cut them away from Harriet's window because they interfered with her view of the bay and sea and towering hills they love so well. And the crooning of a little mother over a baby's cradle fills the home with music sweeter to its builder than any note ever heard in grand opera.

THE END.